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## **Creating Future Bridges: theatre training models and enterprise skills in the digital age**

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### **Author's Biography**

Associate Professor Sandra Gattenhof is Head of Drama in the Creative Industries Faculty, Queensland University of Technology. She is co-leader of the Creative Education and Creative Workforce theme in the newly established Creative Lab at QUT. Previously she has lead the research group in Art, Design and Creative Education and was co-program leader of the Children and Youth Cultures strand within the QUT Research Centre *Children and Youth Research Centre (CYRC)*. She has been a Drama Australia President and Board member in the role of Director of Arts Education and Industry Partnerships and is Drama Australia's representative on National Advocates for Arts Education (NAAE). Sandra has been honoured with Drama Queensland Life Member Award for Longstanding Contribution to the Drama Community (2012).

### **Abstract**

Future workforce predictions indicate that 70% of young people will enter the workforce radically affected by automation (Foundation for Young Australians 2015, p. 4). So what might this mean for young people who see their career in drama and theatre? How might a case be made for the positioning of enterprise skills, especially problem solving, creativity and social intelligence, that are inherently part of the theatre-making process, to be recognised within this milieu? Using data interview gathered from past and present Queensland Theatre Company Youth Ensemble members this paper will articulate how young people see the value of arts engagement and training for their future contexts. The argument is refracted through Nicholson's idea of the "politics of participation" (2011, p. 201) to interrogate theatre participation modes,

aesthetic experience and possible sites of learning and/or training in the digital age.

## Introduction

Arun Sharma in his paper, *The Human Touch In An Automated World: Are The Creative Arts Ready To Respond?* (2016, n.p.) posed an interesting challenge for those of us that teach young people in schools and in universities. Sharma says,

Let us fast forward and imagine a time in the not too distant future where every student wishes to take a minor in one of the creative and performing arts disciplines – they have become the source of a new set of sought-after generic attributes.

What Sharma is hinting at here is in his phrase “new set of sought-after generic attributes” is related to skill-sets that have been identified as being necessary for the 21<sup>st</sup> century workforce. Within this frame of reference there is also notions of increased productivity and innovation, the debate around transforming the STEM agenda to a STEAM or STEAMED (that includes enterprise and design with the Arts) as well as automation in some workforce sectors, which will not be explored in this paper. The skill-set that Sharma speaks of is situated around an amalgam of what is classified as enterprise skills that include problem solving, creativity & innovation, criticality, communication skills, project management and social intelligence. Such skills are seen to be transferrable across different jobs and have been “found to be as powerful a predictor of long-term job success as technical knowledge” (Foundation for Young Australians 2016, p.1). This dialogue is not new in the Australian educational context. The debate circulated in the late 1980s and early 1990s with the development of the *Mayer Key Competencies*. The report commissioned by the Australian Educational Council and was subsequently undertaken by the Finn Committee (1991) concluded that there were certain competencies that needed to be addressed in post-compulsory education and

training to allow Australia's young people to effectively participate in work and adult life, including unpaid work and further education. The *Mayer Key Competencies* sought to develop links between schools, vocational education and training and industry. The *Mayer Key Competencies* arising from the Finn Report (1991) were outlined as:

- Collecting, analyzing and organizing information
- Communicating ideas and information
- Planning and organizing activities
- Working with others and in teams
- Using mathematical ideas and techniques
- Solving problems
- Using technology.

An additional eighth competency of 'cultural understandings' was outlined in the Finn Report but was not included in the *Mayer Key Competencies* due to ongoing debate at the time. However, the National Affiliation of Arts Educators (NAAE) in conjunction with Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) and DEETYA undertook a project in 1995 to align the *Mayer Key Competencies* with arts subjects and deemed that 'cultural understandings' was of special interest to arts educators so therefore included it in the scope of the project.

Australia was not alone in its quest to align arts learning to workforce and life-skill development. *Drama Improves Lisbon Key Competences in Education (DICE) Report* (2011), an international EU-supported project, outlined the effects of educational theatre and drama on five of the eight Lisbon Key Competences (2006) for lifelong learning. The competencies identified are particularly necessary for personal fulfillment and development, social inclusion, active citizenship and employment. DICE looked at impact that educational theatre and drama has an impact on five Lisbon Key Competences. They were:

1. Communication in the mother tongue
2. Learning to learn

3. Interpersonal, intercultural and social competences, civic competence
4. Entrepreneurship
5. Cultural expression.

More recently investigations into student competencies for work-readiness have noted that as well as achievement of functional literacy and numeracy, and information, media and technology skills the four essential skills/competencies “students must also learn the essential skills for success in today’s world, such as critical thinking, problem-solving [often described as creativity], communication and collaboration” (Partnership for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Learning 2011, p.1). These competencies are described as “learning and innovation skills [that] separate students who are prepared for increasingly complex life and work environments” (Partnership for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Learning 2011, p.2). Iyengar & Hudson (2014) note that, “education in dance, theater, music and the visual arts helps instill the curiosity, creativity, imagination and capacity for evaluation that are perceived to a productive ... workforce” (p.2). Iyengar & Hudson (2014) go onto say that “creativity trumps other leadership characteristics” (p.2). Across a number of academic articles and policy documents the realisation of creativity is marked out as a key work/life skill for the 21<sup>st</sup> century (see Iyengar & Hudson 2014; Partnership for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Learning 2011). In this context creativity is about how we think not just about artistic enterprise. It is about the capacities for students to engage in problem-solving and divergent thinking both individually and in teams.

Engagement in the Drama, and more broadly, the Arts through educational contexts is often said to be a means of developing critical and creative thinking. Arts education has also been argued to enhance performance in non-arts academic subjects such as mathematics, science, reading and writing, and to strengthen students’ academic motivation, self-confidence, and ability to communicate and co-operate effectively. Arts education thus seems to have a positive impact on the three subsets of skills that we define as “skills for innovation” or what is now called enterprise skills: skills in thinking and creativity; and behavioural and social skills (Winner, Goldstein and Vincent-Lacrin 2013). Mary-Ann Hunter (2005, p.27) suggests that the benefit of arts education for problem-solving skill may lie in the opportunities that arts

activities provide students to reflect, plan, organize, set goals, make decisions, and apply learned skills to new and unique ways as well as boost students' confidence to attempt unfamiliar tasks. Indeed, Australian government policy notes that, "the arts have a big role to play in contributing ... to the development of individuals able to communicate well, think originally and critically, adapt to change, work cooperatively, connect with both people and ideas, and find solutions to problems as they occur" (Australia Council for the Arts, 2006, p.3).

So, a question arises here, (1) How can performing arts disciplines such as drama respond to the changing work environment and required enterprise skill-set to enable young people to transition successfully into further training and/or the workforce?

To locate a possible response to the question I will use the Queensland Theatre Company Youth Ensemble as an example of activity.

### **Queensland Theatre Company Youth Ensemble - short case study of enterprise skills in action**

In 2015 I undertook research to uncover the historic development of Queensland Theatre Company's Education and Youth Program. This research focused not on a chronology of events related to the inclusion of young people within the Company. The study engaged data was gathered from two main sources – archival analysis (including company annual reports, press clippings) and oral histories that took the form of semi-structured interviews with company staff (n = 6) and artists employed by the company to work with young people (n = 5) as well as two focus groups of Youth Ensemble members both past and present (n = 11). The research had ethical clearance from Queensland University of Technology Research Ethics Unit and met the requirements of the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research. Queensland Theatre Company staff and employed artists agreed to have their identities made known in the research. As the Youth Ensemble members were minors at the time of interview the focus groups

were undertaken their names were de-identified.

In conducting the research a story thread emerged, particularly through the focus groups conducted with present and past Youth Ensemble members, which coalesced around the notions of training and industry connectedness. This is that story.

Queensland Theatre Company (QTC) is the state's flagship theatre company. When Wesley Enoch<sup>1</sup> was appointed to the position of QTC artistic director in 2010 there was a rethinking and reshaping of the education program within the company to allow children and young people to be more active participants within activities that fall under the banner of education and outreach. The most significant example of this change is the reintroduction of the Youth Ensemble after an absence of seventeen years. The change heralded by Wesley Enoch and education program staff that can be characterized by a move from a reception model to a participation model. From its establishment the company's activity included attention to the provision of theatre experiences for children and young people. This is explicitly stated in the *Queensland Theatre Company Act 1970* in three out of the eight guiding principles. These are outlined as: "(d) children and young people should be supported in their appreciation of and involvement in the arts of the theatre; (e) diverse audiences should be developed; and (f) capabilities for life-long learning about the arts of the theatre should be developed" (Queensland Government, 1970, p. 6). To enact these three guiding principles in the provision of theatre events and experiences for Queensland children and young people a variety of strategies and programs have employed. These activities over the years have included attendance by young people at mainstage performances at part of their school curriculum program, dedicated matinee performances for schools of mainstage productions, touring Theatre-in-Education productions, Theatre Residency Week, post show education workshops, Artist-in-Schools workshops, teacher professional development workshops, production of educational resources

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<sup>1</sup> Wesley Enoch completed his tenure as Queensland Theatre Company Artistic Director in October 2015.

and work experience opportunities for secondary students. Queensland Theatre Company is one of the few Queensland arts organisations to have a dedicated, full time education producer. However, despite all the activity to be found in the provision of access to theatre product and experience for young people the Company was missing a commitment to young peoples learning or as Nicholson (2011) states it was absent of “the artistic vision and influencing of the theatre’s architecture” (Nicholson, 2011, p. 209) as an enabler for young people to develop their own sites and modes of learning.

### **Contemporary Youth Engagement Activities at Queensland Theatre Company**

The re-engagement of young people within the creative life of the company by Wesley Enoch was derived from a deeply personal position based on Enoch’s longevity of engagement with the Company, that began as a young person who participated in Theatre Experience Week and the Queensland Youth Theatre (now the Youth Ensemble). As an emerging theatre-maker Enoch was a member of the Company’s Queensland Youth Theatre and moved onto employment as a tutor when the youth theatre arm was renamed Brolgas.

Enoch speaks eloquently of the role that his engagement in the Queensland Youth Theatre played in the development of him as an artist. He says,

As a young Aboriginal boy from Woodridge<sup>2</sup>, the idea of joining a youth theatre was one of three things I was doing at the time. There was school drama, there was the amateur theatre group and there was youth theatre at Queensland Theatre Company. So I was already creating a pathway through this stuff. So the Queensland Theatre Company stuff was all about accessing another level of skill another level of resourcing and a different tribe of people who could push me further on than I could do at school or at the amateur theatre group. That kind of sense of

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<sup>2</sup> Woodridge is a suburb of Logan City in the South East of Queensland, Australia. Australian Bureau of Statistics (2011) classified Woodridge as the fifth most disadvantaged area in Greater Brisbane.



ambition was already being encouraged in me as a fifteen year old. (Wesley Enoch, personal interview, April 1, 2015).

This enthusiasm for practice is echoed in the comments from past Youth Ensemble members who described their engagement with the company as being able to,

... do more of what you loved. It was just, it was something extra, and something that you could go and feel like you were kind of doing something a bit special and doing something that was doing to really help you, and just getting to do it more than just at school. (Past Youth Ensemble focus group member 1, June 10, 2015).

Enoch saw part of his remit in leading the Company was "... to get young people into the building" (Wesley Enoch, personal interview, April 1, 2015). This seemingly simple intention speaks to how, as Helen Nicholson notes, the,

... politics of place and aesthetics of space have a particular importance in theatre education, and whether young people become uncritical cultural consumers or develop their own cultural capital and abilities as theatre-makers. (Nicholson, 2011, p. 200)

Hoepper notes the development of cultural capital was underpinned by the a "keenness under [Wesley's] leadership to look at ways of engaging with young people in a deeper way". (Katherine Hoepper, personal interview, April 7, 2015). By taking up this position, "young people become more than a tick-a-box priority ... by creating multiple entry and diverse entry points for young people" (Bourke & Hunter 2011, p. 34) to move them beyond uncritical consumers. Nicholson (2011, p. 200) believes "participation in is being redefined in twenty-first century theatre education [and is] creating new opportunities for young people to learn alongside theatre-makers as fellow artists".

With Wesley Enoch's appointment the reintroduction of a program akin to the early Youth Theatre program named the Queensland Theatre Company Youth Ensemble occurred. The Youth Ensemble demands a high level of commitment from participants and celebrates and strives for excellence, with many participants going on to study performance, acting or disciplines in the Creative Industries. The Youth Ensemble trains out of school hours, during the school year, with theatre professionals, who are also contracted to the company as directors or actors, to develop and advance their skills as actors. Each group works towards a performance showcase season at a Queensland Theatre Company home venue, usually the Bille Brown Studio. All Ensemble members receive a season ticket to a range of Queensland Theatre Company productions and are invited to participate in excursions to the theatre throughout the year.

Nicholson (2011) points out that,

Making space for learning in theatres not only requires new ways of thinking about participation and new aesthetic forms, ... it also depends on young people's ability to generate their own spatial meanings within the building. (Nicholson, 2011, p. 209)

The overt attention to theatres as learning spaces for young people gave rise to the QTC Youth Ensemble. The Ensemble model is very different to the dominant historic Australian youth theatre process and practice in that youth theatre staff and youth focused activity usually does not have connectivity to a state theatre company. Rather youth theatres in the Australian context are in the parlance of the Australia Council for the Arts<sup>3</sup> are a small to medium business operating autonomously from state structures. The work of the Youth and Education Program in which the Youth Ensemble sits is part of the company ecology rather than being hived off elsewhere. Enoch states that, "having the 75 young people regularly coming into the company actually changes the way we operate" (Wesley Enoch, personal interview, April 1, 2015). He expands on this notion by saying, "it affects the way we think about

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<sup>3</sup> Australia Council for the Arts is the Australian Government's arts funding and advisory body.

young audiences and also the needs of these young people” (ibid.). As a secondary point of difference the artists who are employed as tutors with the Youth Ensemble are professional artists connected to the Company. This is as Enoch notes, “... something unique with the offering. [The young people] can see those artists on our stages and see their work” (Wesley Enoch, personal interview, April 1, 2015).

The work of the Youth Ensemble can be characterized as “an industrial process rather than a kind of educational process” (Lucas Stibbard, personal interview, June 25, 2015) that has a strong focus on skill development over a year or more with two performance outcomes per year. This approach is dissimilar to a youth theatre or amateur theatre approach that where individuals learn to act through rehearsal and production. Taking such an approach supports Nicholson’s (2011) call to embrace young people as co-artists thereby equalising the power dynamic in which a socially constructed experience of learning is foregrounded. It has also allowed for young people to make choices about the role theatre education has for them in future contexts. This learning is situated in skill development related to issues of professionalism and career pathways. One respondent noted, “... the opportunity to work with professionals was something that set this course apart. It is an opportunity you do not really find elsewhere” (Past Youth Ensemble focus group member 1, June 10, 2015). Another respondent built on this by saying, “it gave us skills we needed to work in the context of a professional theatre company” (Past Youth Ensemble focus group member 6, June 10, 2015). All respondents noted that the engagement through the Youth Ensemble “taught them how we should hold ourselves as artists when we are working in a professional space” (Past Youth Ensemble focus group member 6, June 10, 2015) if they are going to develop successful careers in the performing arts industry. The need for training to develop career pathways for young people is deeply rooted into the life of the company. When asked about why a state theatre company needs to embed the creative lives of young people in their organisation a senior staff member responded by saying, “as the peak theatre organisation in Queensland we can provide an aspirational career path for young people who want to work in that sphere eventually”

(Katherine Hoepper, personal interview, April 7, 2015). One artist employed as a tutor with the Youth Ensemble believes the company has a “responsibility to represent and help shape the artistic growth of the state, and part of that is being about to give access to people who might become artists in the future” (Lucas Stibbard, personal interview, June 25, 2015). A past member of the Youth Ensemble supported this view through the following response, “it is fundamental for a state theatre company to offer something for young people, because acting doesn’t start when you are 25, you know? I think fostering creative talent at a young age is smart” (Past Youth Ensemble focus group member 6, June 10, 2015). Such an approach activates Nicholson’s position “... that for any group of people to feel part of that space ... they need to be recognized by others as integral to producing that space” (Nicholson, 2011, p.209). The involvement of young people in the core business of the Company has recognition from the artistic director, the most influential and most senior worker within the Company. As such it develops the guiding principle of the Company that states, “capabilities for life-long learning about the arts of the theatre should be developed” (Queensland Government, 1970, p. 6) become a tangible part of the Company’s lived experience. The democratizing of the theatre space undertaken through the Ensemble model has allowed “young people a chance to produce equitable spaces in which to work” (Nicholson, 2011, p. 213) by embracing the working principle of co-artistry.

### **Lessons Learnt – embracing an industrial approach to drama/theatre in senior secondary learning experiences**

Using the QTC Youth Ensemble model and the experiences of its participants it is clear that young people can both want and can recognize the value of explicit training models that are embedded in the industrial contexts of the theatre industry. The QTC Youth Ensemble allows young people to see possible training and career pathways as part of their engagement with the ensemble that for most young people may not evident in the experiences within a secondary school environment. The model creates a relational and sometimes transitional space in which young people are able to gain a clear

sense of possible career progression in theatre and the performance industries. This sentiment is captured in comments from past Youth Ensemble members who stated, “I certainly knew I was a student ... but they treated us like professionals and I really liked that” (Past Youth Ensemble focus group member 1, June 10, 2015) and “there was equal respect” (Past Youth Ensemble focus group member 1, June 10, 2015).

Young people’s participation inside the Queensland Theatre Company has embraced “methodologies and pedagogies of theatre education [that] depend on interactivity” (Nicholson, 2011, p. 213). As such the authentic engagement with needs and interests of young people around theatre literacy and theatre skill development using the premise of co-artistry. As such the experiences that young people engage in the Youth Ensemble at Queensland Theatre Company can be seen to be complementary to their formal education. But it would seem from recent Australian research undertaken by the Foundation for Young Australians both formal and complementary educational contexts are not doing well at overt engagement of the “new set of sought-after generic attributes” identified as being necessary for the 21<sup>st</sup> century workforce success. The Foundation for Young Australians report titled *The new work order: ensuring young Australians have skills and experience for the jobs of the future, not the past*. (2015) shows that “despite staying longer in education, young people are not developing the enterprise skills increasingly demanded for work” (Foundation for Young Australians 2016, p.3).

Andreas Schleicher, director of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), believes that rather just than teaching and assessing subject specificity, “we need to think about what sort of people we need to create tomorrow’s world, and what [the] fundamental building blocks to shape that” (Schleicher in Clark 2016, p. 23). Schleicher goes onto say that,

When you do this you arrive at ways of thinking – creativity, critical thinking, problem-solving – and ways of working –

collaborations, social-emotional skills, character, resilience, leadership, empathy. (ibid.)

The missing piece of the puzzle, says Schleicher, is the “clear articulation of those dimensions. And better measures and metrics” (Schleicher in Clark 2016, p. 23). In short, arts educators need to more explicit about teaching and providing feedback to students on enterprise skills, and more importantly placing some learning experiences in an industrial context through project or problem-based learning, work integrated learning and taking learning out of the classroom context more often. Perhaps for too long arts educators have proffered the view that the skills mentioned by Schleicher, and many other before him, that the skills of problem solving, creativity and social intelligence are natively embedded into the what and the how of what we do. There has been some thought around this as PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) has introduced a measure for social skills. If this is possible, then perhaps the same attention could be focused on the enterprise skills. Given the focus on enabling young people to transition into viable careers in drama and theatre or beyond might there be a case to be made for the positioning of enterprise skills, more centrally in our teaching agendas to make our young people 21<sup>st</sup> century workforce ready? Such reorientation will allow our young people to “become job creators, not just job seekers, and navigate more complex careers” (Foundation for Young Australians 2016, p.1).

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